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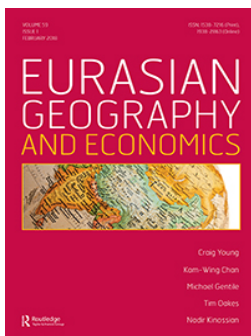
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# Geopolitical cultures, pragmatic patriotism, and Russia's disputed islands

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## ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the notion of “geopolitical culture” as a conceptual tool for understanding debates over the formulation of foreign policy in contemporary Russia. To draw out the value of this concept, the paper explores the symbolism of territory as a means for restoring Russia's status, respect, and power. However, in contrast to previous studies, it traces the ways in which a concession of territory has been promoted as a device for achieving Russia's great power ambitions. More broadly, the paper seeks to stimulate a wider debate on reconceptualizing the relationship between territory and identity in Russia, at the same time as it places Russia's Far Eastern borderlands at the heart of debates on the spatial imaginaries of the Russian homeland. By drawing on and advancing recent theoretical innovations in critical geopolitics, and recognizing the significance of the discourse of nationalism within these framings, the paper explores the nuanced and multiple story lines that constitute Russia's geopolitical culture. Through this approach, intriguing and complex plot lines and unexpected twists are revealed, which have at times been obscured by nationalist-territorial-revanchist narratives on Putin's Russia. It is suggested that such approaches can also provide insights for interpreting cases and contexts beyond Russia and Eurasia.

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It is no accident that the Torah calls giving up territory a great sin. Both territory and the wealth of the land, people – those all remain the most crucial factors

Vladimir Putin, October 2017

Almost 13 years to the day before the above words, a longstanding dispute between Russia and China over a number of islands in the Amur River was finally resolved. On October 14, 2004, Russia agreed to concede Tarabarov Island and approximately half of Bolshoi Ussuriiskii Island to the People's Republic of China. This was followed a month later by Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, suggesting in a TV broadcast that Russia would be prepared to concede a number of small islands making up part of the Kuril Islands in return for a peace treaty with Japan.

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The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, described Lavrov's interview at the time as "very good" and praised the minister of foreign affairs for "expanding the picture of our foreign policy priorities" (see Lomanov 2004, 1; "Yapontsam nuzhny" 2004).

This paper seeks to advance the conceptual frameworks applied to Russian geopolitics in order to interrogate the contradictory, complex, and contested relationship between territory and identity in contemporary Russia. To achieve this, it traces the ways in which the conceptual lens of "geopolitical culture" can be developed in order to offer an expanded understanding of Russia's "prevailing sense of identity, place, and mission in the world" (Toal 2017, 39; see also Dijkink 1996). For Gerard Toal, the idea of geopolitical culture is

[F]irst and foremost about the identity of a territorial entity and the locational narrative it presents to itself and the world. Its specification involves boundaries of identity and difference, the broad civilizational realm within which it positions itself, the states it views as friends, and those it differentiates itself from and defines itself against. A geopolitical culture, in other words, is made up of a series of geographical imaginations about self and other in the world. A geopolitical culture is also about security and defense, about whom the territorial entity holds to be its enemies and the strategies it deems necessary to preserve its existence, identity, and capacity for maneuver (Toal 2017, 39)

Such an approach has close parallels with social constructivist approaches to international relations as well as interpretations of nationalism as discourse (Calhoun 1997, 6) and the significance of territory in these discourses (see, for example, Anderson 1991; Herb and Kaplan 1999; Johnston, Knight, and Kofman 2014; Penrose 2002; A. Smith 1999; Yiftachel 2002). In his recent study of a Russia "released from the bonds and burdens of Sovietness," Toal (2017, 64, 70–71) finds its geopolitical culture to be formed around specific spatial and existential questions related to whether Russia is "an empire or a nation-state, a great civilization destined to dominate the heart of Eurasia, an imperial motherland that has responsibilities to all Russian-speaking peoples, or a state that needs to adjust to a postimperial age?"

Drawing on the work of the political scientist, Andrei Tsygankov (2003, 2016), and the geographer Graham Smith (1999), Toal (2017) outlines three distinctive visions of Russia that have characterized the post-Soviet Russian geopolitical culture; namely, a liberal European Russia, a revived imperial Russia, and an independent great power Russia. In the first version, Russia is framed as "a responsible successor state to the Soviet Union, an international law-abiding status quo state [...a...] stability-oriented European power" (74). For elements of Russia's elite the demise of the Soviet Union was "a moment when Russia could reinvent itself anew as part of a liberal Western 'civilized world'" (86). In contrast, the revived imperial Russia is a "territorially revisionist geopolitical fantasy" (76), one that strives to consolidate the former territories of the Russian and Soviet empire within a new territorial vision of the homeland. For Toal, the third group is defined by a sense of mission fixated on restoring Russia as a great power (80).

It is in this final category that Toal places Putin, who “became Russia’s territorial tough, the man who would reverse its status as a territorial victim” (87). Toal offers the term “revanchism” in order to capture Putin’s agenda, as the French word “*revanche*” is “not only associated with the reclamation of lost territories” but also a “desire in a competitive game to recover past position, power, and status” (89). In an earlier usage, it described the

desire of French state elites, in the wake of defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, to *recover the state’s power, honor, and respect*. While this restorationist agenda found particular expression in their desire to recover the ‘lost territories’ of Alsace and parts of Lorraine, it was about much more. *The territory became a symbolic object for the realization of strength, dignity, and esteem* (89, emphasis mine).

This paper challenges such a definition of revanchism for interpreting the Putin agenda. It explores the symbolism of territory, but in the sense that a concession of territory, rather than a recovery of “lost territories,” can also be framed as a means for restoring Russia’s status, respect, and power. In the first instance, it should be noted that in all three of the competing visions of Russia sketched above, the coalitions of intellectual and political elites that they represent, are invariably striving for Russia’s restoration as a great power – whether it be a return to the “civilized” world and a seat at the top table of international society in a liberal world order, or as a revisionist, expansionist empire. They all seek to enhance Russia’s prestige and power in the world, though advocating and rationalizing this from radically different ideological positions. Secondly, this paper explores the ways in which a concession of territory has been promoted as a means to realize Russia’s great power ambitions by representatives of each of the above categories. This fault-line running across these categories points to a need to reformulate these visions with a more nuanced account of the value and symbolism of territory and its role in returning Russia to past position, power, and status.

To explore these themes, the first half of this paper draws on a case study of territorial concession in the geopolitical vision of a liberal European Russia, followed by that of the revived imperial Russia. The second half of this paper questions the caricature of Putin as the revanchist politician and territorial nationalist. What emerges is a patriotic narrative fused with great power rhetoric, but also a pragmatic one in that it attempts to fuse together power and principle, location and law (see Toal 2017, 21). As explored though the case of the dispute with Japan over the Southern Kuril Islands,<sup>1</sup> Putin’s “pragmatic patriotic” approach to mediating the complexities and tensions in the relationship between territory and identity represents part of a wider dialectic strategy to “sublate” certain societal tensions (see Brincat 2011, 697; Richardson 2015). This is not to suggest that such a strategy has succeeded in producing a rational or progressive synthesis of ideas on Russia’s national identity and place in the world, but that it remains a highly contested, contradictory, and fluid process. It corresponds with Toal’s (2017, 40) notion of geopolitical cultures incorporating competing geopolitical visions, whereby the

one that “predominates and drives state foreign policy is the subject of struggle and entrepreneurship in the political arena.” With the *vertikal* structure of power in Russian politics (Monaghan 2012), it also acknowledges how the presidency brings with it the “power to creatively synthesize the different traditions in a state’s geopolitical culture into specific geopolitical-policy storylines” (Toal 2017, 40).

Taken as a whole, this paper seeks to stimulate a wider debate on reconceptualizing prevailing understandings of the relationship between territory and identity in Russia, at the same time as it places Russia’s Far Eastern borderlands at the heart of debates on the spatial imaginaries of the Russian homeland. Using the conceptual lens of geopolitical cultures, and recognizing the significance of the discourse of nationalism within this framing, it traces the importance of Russia’s distant and disputed islands in a geopolitical culture that has been overrepresented – both inside and outside of Russia – by a focus on Europe, the West, and post-Soviet space. It argues that Russia’s Far Eastern borderlands, and its relations with its neighbors in the region, need to be hard-wired into interpretations of a wider geopolitical culture. Through the notion of pragmatic patriotism, it explores the ways in which the current leadership has attempted to reconcile competing geopolitical visions in order to secure a storyline of Russia’s great power status in Europe and Asia.

### **A new Russia, in a new world**

On 25 December 1991 the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin, to be replaced by the Russian tricolor. With the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union the following day, a new Russia emerged, which now existed at its smallest territorial extent since the time of Peter the Great and occupied an area for which there were few historical antecedents (O’Loughlin and Talbot 2005, 25). It was a scenario that shocked and bewildered many Russians (Dunlop 1997, 49), of which a considerable part of the population did not even recognize the boundaries of the current territorial state as a legitimate political unit (Kolossoff 1999, 74). As Boris Vasilev put it in an article published in *Sobesednik* in August 1992, “Russians have not developed into a nation. They never knew where the borders of their state were, and they still do not [know]” (cited in Tolz 1992, 3).

It is no coincidence that the early years of the post-Soviet Russian state “were dominated by a frenetic production of maps and atlases, seeking to delineate the national topography in the public consciousness” (Billé 2014, 170), while popular textbooks on geopolitics came to “focus on Russia being thrown back to the border of pre-Petrine Rus, with the impending danger of further contraction” (Suslov 2013, 25–26). This is a concern that endures to the present, and an article by the journalist Oleg Kashin in *Slon* published in October 2013 noted that

Russia has never existed in the way it is pictured on contemporary maps. [It has] T[u]va and Chechnya but no Ukraine and North Kazakhstan – this is like picturing the United States with Texas, Hawaii, and Alaska but without Alabama and West Virginia. The

Russian border in its present state is ideally suited for debates and fantasies of the “what if style” (Kashin 2013).

More liberal-minded commentators have also reflected that, for Russia, “the problem of space is inseparably linked to and compounded by the problem of identity” (Trenin 2001, 26), while Putin has characterized the period after the end of the Soviet Union as a moment when the “[e]pidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself” (Putin 2005 cited in Toal 2017, 55).

It captured a public mood in which Russia’s redefined “geographical contours evoke nothing but a sense of loss” (Suslov 2013, 3), a feeling that was accentuated in the early 1990s by an attendant decline in Russia’s geopolitical power, a rapidly deteriorating economic situation, and the complete abandonment of state ideology. It is in response to these cataclysmic events that there emerged from the political and intellectual elite a call for the construction of a distinct “Russian idea” that could replace communist ideology and “pull the country together territorially, socially, culturally, and morally” (Lynn and Bogorov 1999, 101). As John Breuilly (1993, 19) has noted, the rise of nationalism is historically associated with “the management of large groups which have suddenly intruded into a previously exclusive political arena.” The end of one-party rule demanded an urgent search for a state-sponsored narrative that could unite and bind together the territories and peoples that made up the new, democratic Russia. In order to fill the vacuum left by the once prevailing and supposedly unifying communist ideology, various ways of defining Russia and Russians suddenly assumed new relevance and were promoted by coalitions of the political and intellectual elite.

Within these definitions there emerged an obsession with territory and identity which swept up the issue of the Southern Kuril Islands into nationalist politics and spatial imaginaries of the nation, demonstrating how certain locales can lay dormant – latent in the public consciousness – only to become suddenly of immense significance for the “nation,” saturated with wider ideological and political meaning. An indicator of the way that territory can be divested and invested with such significance for nationalist discourses was revealed in a report commissioned by the Valdai Discussion Group and published in February 2014, just a month before the annexation of Crimea. The report included a poll in which 74% of respondents stated that the Kuril Islands were Russian, while only 56% believed that Crimea was Russian (Likhachev and Makarov 2014, 23). The poll highlights the fluctuating symbolism of territory and as with Crimea, the Southern Kurils have come to assume at certain moments a critical role in defining and articulating the self-image of a new Russia, in a new world. It is in this context that a case study of the debates over these islands provides a fascinating lens through which to observe new insights into competing geopolitical visions of the nation, and the attempts by the Russian leadership to co-opt and resolve some of the tensions between them.

By way of background, these islands form the southern part of a volcanic chain stretching from the northeast coast of Hokkaido to the southern tip of Kamchatka, and are comprised of Iturup, Kunashir, and Shikotan, as well as the rocks and small



islands that make up the unpopulated Habomai group. From 1855 (when the border between Russia and Japan was first formalized) until 1945, the Southern Kurils were recognized by both sides as part of Japan. However, after Japan's defeat in the Second World War, Soviet soldiers and citizens began to settle on these islands, and by the end of 1948, the last of the Japanese on the islands had been deported (Sevela 2001, 75).

Today these islands are claimed by Japan, and referred to collectively as the Northern Territories. Perhaps the closest to a compromise on the islands' future was the idea of the transfer of Shikotan and the Habomai Islands, which was proposed by the Soviet side in return for a peace treaty. While both parliaments ratified a Joint Declaration to this effect in 1956, an exchange of the islands was never realized, and today there is still no postwar peace treaty between the two countries (see, for example, Call 1992; Hasegawa 1998; Kuhrt 2007; Stephan 1974). The following section explores how these distant and barren islands came to assume critical significance in the competing geopolitical visions and reconfigured spatial imaginaries of a new Russia.

### **“Peking is a friend to us, but Tokyo is dearer”**

In the visions of Russia sketched at the start of this paper, Dmitri Trenin, the Director of the Carnegie Center, Moscow, is identified in Toal's typologies as a proponent of a liberal, Westernizing Russia (Toal 2017, 73). However, in recent years his geopolitical orientation has undergone somewhat of an eastward reorientation. Writing in 2011, Trenin described in evocative terms what this involved:

Russia's cutting-edge, twenty-first century frontier lies to the east, where it has both a need and a chance to catch up with its immediate Pacific neighbors [...] if Peter the Great were alive today, he would decamp from Moscow again – only this time to the Sea of Japan, not the Baltic. As such Russia would do well to think of Vladivostok as its twenty first century capital. It is a seaport, breathing openness (2011, 241).

This vision is one shared by a number of scholars and commentators who urge that Russia's current priority should be a national project to develop Siberia and the Far East (see Bordachev and Kanayev 2014). Much of the material and discursive energy behind this reorientation towards Asia is a response to a recognition that where once the Soviet Union represented the vanguard of modernity – bringing electrification, industrial complexes, roads, aviation, and railways across Eurasia – in the last few decades it has been Siberia and the Russian Far East which have lagged behind the economies of Japan, China, and South Korea.

In order to capture the dynamism and opportunity of this region, some members of Russia's academic, diplomatic, and political elite have privileged the idea of developing relations with Japan. From the early 1990s there have been repeated declarations that Japan and Russia are “doomed to cooperate” due to the Russian economy's need for technology and investment from Japan, a desire for diversified energy supplies in Japan, and a mutual anxiety over the rise of China (Roginko et al.



1998). In 2007, Mikhail Kamynin, the then-director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs department for information and media, acknowledged that “Relations with Japan, our Far Eastern neighbor, member of the G8, and one of the largest economies in the world, is regarded as a priority direction in Russian foreign policy” (“Glavy MID” 2007). While more recently Sergei Karaganov, an advisor to Russia’s first president, Boris Yeltsin, and the current honorary chairman Honorary Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, has suggested that

[...] if the current economic trends persist, it is very likely that Russia east of the Urals and later the whole country will turn into an appendage of China – first as a warehouse of resources, and then economically and politically. This will happen without any “aggressive” or unfriendly efforts by China, it will happen by default (Karaganov 2011).

Such anxieties have been voiced over a number of issues concerning China, including an unbalanced trade structure (with raw materials heading to China, and finished goods exported to Russia), China’s lack of major investment in the Russian Far East (Tret’yak 2014), limited opportunities for technological transfers, and concern over Chinese enterprises hindering competition and adversely affecting Russian manufacturers (Kashin 2014, 6). There have also been long-held fears over the prospect of Chinese immigration (Sullivan and Renz 2010), with the former presidential representative of the Russian Far East, Konstantin Pulikovskii, stating in 2000 that he was “disturbed” by the increasing influence of Chinese citizens on domestic politics as “facing us across the Amur River is the vastness of China – 1.25 billion people. And that billion gaze longingly at a fertile, rich, and good land” (*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 15 July 2000, cited in Kuhrt 2007, 126). At the regional level, a survey of local elites conducted in 2008 by the Institute of History, Archeology, and Ethnography in Vladivostok found that half (49%) of respondents viewed “the growth of the economic and military power of China” as the greatest danger to Russia’s eastern regions (Plaksen 2008), while others have noted the wide-scale poaching and illegal export of Russian natural resources to China (Zigan’shin 2008, 168–170).

In contrast, Japanese activity and investment in projects, enterprises, or businesses in the Russian Far East is seen as bringing advanced technology, techniques, and practices without large-scale population transfers and a dependency on Chinese labor. It is against this background that overcoming the territorial issue in order to facilitate Japanese involvement in developing and investing in the Far East of Russia has periodically come to the fore. In 2005, Trenin co-authored a booklet explicitly setting out his belief that Russia should resolve the dispute over the Southern Kurils according to the 1956 formula and the transfer of Shikotan and the Habomai Islands (Trenin and Mikheev 2005). He presented a “two-plus alpha” formula, where Japan could be offered additional non-territorial incentives, such as support for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, cooperation over North Korea, support for expanding the role of Japan’s self-defense forces, and the development of an East Asian hydrocarbon market (20).

Trenin restated his proposal in December 2012, again advocating that Russia should immediately give up Shikotan and the Habomai (as agreed in 1956), with Japan supporting economic activity on the other islands and across Russia, as well as establishing a joint economic zone between the two countries (Trenin and Weber 2012). However, Trenin now suggested that Russia should also offer the remaining two islands, Iturup and Kunashir, which should be integrated into Japan within 50 years of signing an agreement (2012). His proposals made no plea to overcoming past injustices, but was instead framed solely on pragmatic economic, political, and strategic grounds. It was a set of ideas developed from an earlier article published in the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in 2003 under the heading “Peking is a Friend to us, But Tokyo is Dearer.” In this article, Trenin sketched the logic and rationale of his geopolitical vision and the role it assigned to Japan

[I]n my view, we should bet on Japan as our main partner in the task of modernizing Siberia and the Far East. Japan could play here a role similar to that of Germany and the European Union in relations with the western regions of Russia. The financial possibilities of Japan, its technological leadership and geopolitical position makes Tokyo an appropriate “modernization partner” for Russia in the East. Developing such a partnership with Japan would also contribute to consolidating the position of Russia in Asia as a whole (Trenin 2003).

For Trenin, these scraps of territory in the North Pacific are insignificant when compared with the far greater and more pressing task of consolidating and developing the Russian Far East. Such a pivotal role for Japan, and the concession of the islands in return for re-establishing Russia’s status in Asia, also shares a remarkable and perhaps uncomfortable parallel for Trenin with the rehabilitation and reformulation of a very different set of ideas associated with Russian Eurasianism.

The term Eurasianism emerged as one of the most popular keywords in “the volatile ideological arsenal of post-Soviet politics,” and although its meaning is highly contested and varied, its multiple definitions and movements invariably claim to be the heirs to a set of ideas associated with a unique synthesis of European and Asian principles originally articulated by a community of Russian émigrés in the 1920s (Bassin 2007, 279, 281). These individuals constructed a set of scientific and ideological arguments to suggest that Russia was a contiguous Eurasian cultural, political, and even ethno-linguistic community – “a world unto itself,” and, crucially, one distinct from Europe and the West (see Bassin 1991, 14).

Perhaps the most well-known exponent of the “neo-Eurasianism” of post-Soviet Russia is the charismatic and idiosyncratic figure of Alexander Dugin, leader of the International Eurasian Movement; Head of Conservative Studies at Moscow State University (until 2014), and “without doubt post-Soviet Russia’s most prolific and well-known geopolitician” (Bassin and Aksenov 2006, 105). Over the last two decades, Dugin has come to exercise a “quasi-monopoly” over a certain part of the current Russian ideological spectrum and has frequently boasted of his contacts with presidential advisors and deputies in the State Duma (Laruelle 2012, 107). He sees the world through a grand “civilizational” prism, where great powers compete

against each other in a struggle for space, spheres of influence, and survival. It is a brand of Eurasianism marked by a virulent anti-Westernism in which Russia's destiny is to be the guarantor of distinct civilizational values across Eurasia's continental space (see Laruelle 2012, 115–120).

In the competing geopolitical visions of Russia outlined earlier, Dugin is recognized by Toal (2017, 73, 76) as an intellectual proponent of an imperial Russia, promoting a “new order” of space, identity, and power in Russia.” As part of a struggle to assert Russia's hegemony over Eurasia, Dugin has proposed building an axis to resist Atlanticist influences (Tsygankov 2003, 109). In his Eurasianist fantasy, Russia's continental destiny is to ally itself in Asia, with Japan, which alongside Russia, Germany, and Iran would form part of a “confederation of large spaces,” with each understood as a quasi-empire that dominates its corresponding civilizational area (Dugin 2000, 247 cited in Laruelle 2012, 117). These visions of expansionist Eurasianism assign to East Asia a strictly instrumental role based on a dichotomous worldview of Eurasian land power, led by Russia, against the West (Rangsimaporn 2006, 380). It is within this geopolitical meta-narrative that Dugin sees the possibility of transferring the Southern Kurils in exchange for assistance in resisting Chinese expansionism into Siberia and the Russian Far East, as well as releasing Japan from its American domination. In 2004 in Russia's most popular news weekly, *Argumenty i Fakty*, he carefully summarized this position:

With the question of the Kuril Islands we have a matter with a very delicate geopolitical situation [...] In the future Russian-Japanese relations can become the key for the modernization of the Russian economy and a counter-measure to the demographic expansion of China in Siberia. Therefore Russia is interested in an exchange of the islands for a geopolitical union. [...] In a terrible dream, the United States again sees the strengthening of the strategic axis of Moscow and Tokyo. But if Russia “simply” sets off along the Gorbachev route and begins to squander its lands for a pittance, and sometimes simply for the smile of foreign leaders, it will be a manifest failure. Our conditions must be the withdrawal of Tokyo from the American zone of strategic control and the removal of the American bases on Okinawa (Koshkin and Dugin 2004).

Dugin articulates a grand geopolitical bargain in order to secure the vast spaces of Siberia which is in marked contrast to other advocates of a reconstituted imperial Russia – such as Dmitri Rogozin (deputy prime minister for the defense and space industry, and a former leader of the nationalist party Rodina), Sergei Glaz'ev (formerly a duma deputy for Rodina and its leader, and currently an advisor to Putin), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (leader of the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party of Russia), and Gennady Zyuganov (leader of the Communist Party of Russia) – who have all been unwavering in their resistance to any concession of territory to Japan (see “Deputaty ne Soglasny” 2004; Tsyganok 2004; Zilanov and Plotnikov 2001). However, for Dugin the islands are insignificant compared with the necessity of deflecting China away from Russia, stating that “My Eurasian solution for China is southern expansion, in the direction of Australia, [to] the Pacific Ocean – it is not our problem what [the] local population will think” (Dugin 2008). It is a statement

that vividly captures the essence of Dugin's geopolitical logic and the imperial prism of domination and subordination through which he perceives the world. In his Great Power politics, Russia's Eurasian heartland must be protected against what he interprets as China's "demographic expansion to the north [...and, for this reason] we need some help from the Japanese (2008)." Ultimately, the loss of the Kurils are part of an ambitious gambit to secure a resurgent, assertive, and expansive Eurasian Russia, though Dugin underscores that the trade of territory cannot be for any material gain, but rather an exchange for something altogether more priceless:

[I]t is completely excluded to exchange this for money or some material because it is considered to be a moral case, so we could exchange [one] moral case for another moral case [...] the return of Greater Russia to the [global] scheme [...] We could explain why we give for example our territory to China, Japan, Europe (in the case of Kaliningrad district) in exchange for our greatness, our return to greatness. It is difficult but it is possible. It is completely impossible to explain [this] in exchange for some material reward [...] they have no price [...] they are moral symbols (2008).

In Dugin's geopolitics, any concession of these "moral symbols" could only be in exchange for consolidating Russia's hold on Eurasia, keeping at bay the demographic and economic expansion of China, and resisting what he sees as America's containment and subordination of Russia. No matter how implausible his geopolitical imaginings appear, Dugin remains a visible and connected public figure. Although after extremely controversial and inflammatory statements supporting pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine his access to television appearances was curtailed in August 2014, he continues to harbor an obvious desire – through his political movement, as well as his manipulation of online and traditional media – to consolidate his imperial vision of Eurasianism into the wider public and political consciousness. While Trenin once referred to Dugin as a "very well-read and prolific crackpot with a lot of influence" (Clover 2000), on the issue of the Southern Kurils, both have put forward a similarly pragmatic proposal for restoring Russia's status and power in Europe and Asia. As representatives drawn from competing geopolitical visions of a new Russia, they have nevertheless arrived at the same point – placing an instrumental value on territory and the possibility of exchanging the Southern Kurils in return for developing the Russian Far East and Russia's return to the global scheme.

### **Putin's pragmatic patriotism**

The second part of this article examines how the Russian leadership creatively synthesizes different traditions in Russia's geopolitical culture into a specific geopolitical-policy storyline (see Toal 2017, 40). In the typologies sketched at the outset, Putin is categorized by Toal as a political proponent of Russia as an independent great power with its emphasis on territorial integrity and state strengthening (72-73). The remainder of this paper explores the ways in which the Southern Kurils

have featured in Putin's negotiation and mediation of competing geopolitical visions and his emergence as a "pragmatic patriot." It suggests that Putin's behavior is attributable to a dialectic approach to world politics which has resulted in him becoming the only post-Soviet leader to publically countenance a transfer of the Southern Kurils to Japan. This has occurred at the same time as the president has deployed an effective strategy for limiting any damage to his nationalist credentials by periodically activating a national-patriotic narrative on the immutable nature of Russia's territory and borders which were fixed as a result of the Second World War.

On November 14, 2004, just months after Putin's landslide re-election as president with over 70% of the vote, came a surprise announcement on national TV by Russia's foreign minister. In this announcement Lavrov declared that Russia was willing to accept the principles of the 1956 Joint Declaration between the Soviet Union and Japan, and as a continuator state to the Soviet Union, Russia would recognize this agreement as in existence and allow for the transfer of Shikotan and the Habomai Islands as stipulated in the 1956 agreement if a peace treaty was agreed (*NTV*, November 14 2004 cited in "Na Sakhaline" 2004). While the idea of recognizing the joint declaration may not have been new to Russian and Japanese negotiators, it represented the first time that a territorial concession had been proposed on nationwide television and directed towards a mass audience in Russia. Putin himself praised Lavrov's TV interview, while *ITAR-TASS* reported the president as stating that "We have always fulfilled and will fulfill all obligations taken upon ourselves, especially ratified documents [...]" (November 15, 2004, cited on "Na Sakhaline" 2004; and Lomanov 2004, 1).

Lavrov also used the moment of his announcement to touch on the perceived success of the final demarcation of the Russian–Chinese border. In October 2004, the longstanding dispute over islands in the Amur River was finally resolved when Russia agreed to concede to China Tarabarov Island, and approximately 50% of Bolshoi Ussuriiskii Island. Lavrov suggested that Russia had lost nothing in deciding this problem: "There was no talk about the return of the islands to China. What was talked about was that for the first time in the history of Russian and Chinese relations the territorial problem was settled" ("Lavrov" 2004).

Unfortunately for the Russian side, the day after Lavrov's announcement, on November 15, Japan's Cabinet Secretary, Hiroyuki Hosoda, dismissed the Russian foreign minister's proposal as nothing new, while Junichiro Koizumi, reaffirmed his position that a peace treaty would only follow the return of all the islands (Buszynski 2006, 158). In marked contrast to his previous flexibility on the issue, Putin expressed his frustration less than a year later when he declared in his "Direct Line" with the Russian public on September 27, 2005, that

With regard to the negotiation process with Japan on the Kurils – the four islands – [...] are under the sovereignty of the Russian Federation. It is enshrined in international law. It is one of the results of the Second World War. And on this point, we are not prepared to discuss anything ("Putin na linii" 2005).

He returned to the theme in June 2007, when he reiterated that “we don’t see them as ‘disputed’ since this situation emerged as a result of the Second World War and was fixed by international law in international documents” (Sarkisov 2009, 48). This animation of tropes surrounding the inviolability of Russia’s postwar borders served to deflect attention from the failure of the 2004 initiative. It demonstrated the remarkable ability of the Russian leadership to pick up and then discard a certain set of ideas on territory, borders, and identity depending on which ones appeared to be the most appropriate and timely for legitimating and justifying their actions and initiatives.

However, despite the two sides appearing to be “stuck in diametrically opposed positions” (Fesyun 2007, 5), a compromise close to the 1956 agreement has perhaps never been off the table for Russia. In 2005, the then-Counselor of the Embassy of Russia in Japan, Mikhail Galuzin, reiterated in *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn’* that the 1956 Joint Declaration, including the transfer of Habomai and Shikotan, “is for us an active judicial document” (Galuzin 2005, 92). While in 2009, Konstantin Sarkisov (a former advisor to the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev) suggested that, in private conversations, Putin has several times indicated that because the 1956 Joint Declaration was ratified by both Parliaments it became law (2009, 40).

More recently, Putin also revealed a new rhetorical refinement of his strategy, when, on March 1, 2012, just days before his return as Russia’s president, he signaled that negotiations with Japan over the islands could be restarted. With a black belt in judo, Putin employed terminology from the sport, stating that “We don’t have to achieve victory. In this situation, we have to reach an acceptable compromise. That would be like a ‘hikiwake’ [draw]” (Soejima and Komaki 2012). Enthusiasm for improving relations with Japan appeared to be gaining further momentum in the run-up to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit held in Vladivostok in September 2012. With the idea of a political and economic “pivot” towards the Asia-Pacific region emerging in the agenda of the Russian Government (Bordachev and Kanayev 2014), Lavrov met with his Japanese counterpart, Koichiro Gemba, in Sochi in July 2012, and after the meeting Lavrov specifically highlighted how “both sides realize the necessity to make a strong [emphasis on] modernization, innovation, energy and investment components” (Lavrov 2012).

In April 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Putin discussed Japan’s participation in a project by Russia’s Gazprom to connect its eastern Siberian gas fields to a liquefied natural gas (LNG) export hub near Vladivostok (Manthorpe 2013). At the meeting, Putin also expressed his hope that this agreement and a host of others would lead to Japanese investment in agriculture and forestry, as well as in regional transportation projects (2013). In addition, they issued a joint statement at the end of their meeting, declaring that “The leaders of both countries agreed that the situation where, 67 years after the conclusion of [World War II], we have still been unable to conclude a bilateral peace treaty, looks abnormal” (Weir 2013).

It was also agreed that the Russian and Japanese foreign ministries would “intensify contacts with an aim to developing a mutually acceptable plan” and that this



plan would prioritize two parallel processes on the “discussion of the main subjects of the peace agreement and, simultaneously, ways to actively promote improvements across the full range of Russian-Japanese relations” (Weir 2013). This new impetus was quickly demonstrated when in November 2013 the first “two-plus-two” meeting of the foreign and defense ministers of Japan and Russia was held in Tokyo. Such a format – usually reserved for close allies (Hill 2013) – was indicative of the Russian leadership’s active interest in developing relations with Japan in order to achieve its economic development and security ambitions.

These initiatives were followed by another meeting between Putin and Abe on February 7, 2014, around the time of the opening ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympics. In the midst of a boycott by Western leaders, Abe was conspicuous by his presence at the ceremony, with Putin heralding the progress between the two sides, declaring that “We have seen a good environment created that could help resolve the most difficult problem in bilateral relations” (Heritage and Anishchuk 2014). However, the days after the Sochi Olympics suddenly transformed Russia’s international relations. The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine led to a dramatic worsening of Russia’s relationship with the West. Japan also suspended talks with Moscow over easing visa restrictions, promoting investment, space cooperation, and issued a list of individuals from Russia and Ukraine with asset freezes and travel bans (“Japan Puts Russian Sanctions” 2014). On May 21, 2014, these sanctions were followed by the signing of a huge deal to export Russian gas to China at a reported \$400 billion over 30 years. Additional contracts and memoranda of intent on Chinese investment were also signed in areas such as coal, copper ore, liquefied natural gas, as well as the production of construction materials, petrochemicals, and machine building (Kashin 2014, 6).

Although Putin stressed that the prioritization of China in Russia’s development strategy was not a reaction to events in Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions (Shimotomai 2014), the May 2014 gas deal appeared to herald a sudden reconfiguration of Russia’s geopolitical culture. Just months before his assassination in February 2015, Boris Nemtsov (2014), a political opponent and vocal critic of Putin, had responded to this turn to China stating that

The Crimean adventure has one fateful consequence for Russia [...] In terms of the economy, Russia is now entirely in the hands of the Chinese communists. And their position is well known – Russia is a backward country – a raw materials appendage, which will supply us with cheap gas and cheap oil.

With Putin declaring in 2014 that China had become Russia’s “natural ally” (Fang 2014), on January 20, 2015, Japanese minister of foreign affairs, Fumio Kishida, stated in a speech in Brussels, that “what is happening in Ukraine, it is changing the status quo by means of force, the problem of the Northern Territories (was) also a change of the situation by means of force” (“Strel’tsov” 2015). In response, in May 2015, Lavrov again related the destiny of the Kurils to the Second World War, this time stating that “We refer [Japan] back to the UN Charter, and here they



cannot have any objection, and we can say that Japan is the only country which questions the results of the Second World War, nobody else does this" (Lavrov cited in Dolgopолоv and Shestakova 2015). Shortly after this statement, a series of high-profile visits also took place across the disputed islands, including one by Russia's Prime Minister, Dmitri Medvedev ("Japan Protests" 2015).

During 2015, it appeared that the space for a solution of the Southern Kuril issue had become narrower than ever. It represented a time when Putin's broader attempts to mediate, negotiate, and blend competing streams of thought within society on Russia's national identity and destiny appeared to be faltering in the face of a nationalist fervor around Crimea (see Blakkisrud 2016; Laruelle 2015; Marten 2015; Rogoża 2014; Teper 2016; Tsygankov 2015). Yet, in relations with Japan, the pragmatic side of Putin's patriotism appears to have endured, and it remains significant that Putin – unlike Medvedev and other senior members of his government – has never once visited any of the disputed islands. It serves to demonstrate to the Japanese side that any alternative to Putin's solution on the islands' future could be far worse. It is also telling that Abe has maintained regular and personal contact with Putin, and their meeting at the second East Economic Forum, held in Vladivostok in September 2016, represented the 12th bilateral summit since Abe took office in December 2012. At the Forum, Abe offered concrete plans to implement the eight points of economic cooperation first discussed with Putin in Sochi in May and included proposals for significant investment into critical sectors in the Russian Far East, ranging from infrastructure to energy (Walker and Azuma 2016).

Putin also made an official visit to Japan at the end of 2016, which included a meeting in Abe's home district of Yamaguchi in mid-December 2016. The visit saw the signing of more than 60 deals in which it was suggested that Japanese investments would amount to over \$2.5 billion ("Russia, Japan" 2016). On the territorial issue, an agreement for joint economic activities on the Southern Kurils was also reached, while the "two-plus-two" format of meetings between foreign and defense ministers was re-established after its suspension following the annexation of Crimea. The summit appeared to have ended in favor of Russia, with Abe facing domestic criticism for what were perceived as his concessions to Russia (Mie 2016; Suslina 2016). Sixty years after the 1956 Joint Declaration, it offered a tantalizing suggestion that Putin's patient and pragmatic patriotism was paying dividends. In his fusion of competing geopolitical visions on Russia's national destiny, the terms of the debate on Russia in Asia had markedly shifted with the emergence of a storyline that accentuates the role of Asia in Russia's geopolitical culture and is framed around consolidating Russia's great power ambitions, even if it involves the cost of a concession of territory. This case-study of Russia's distant and disputed islands brings into focus more nuanced and multiple storylines on Russia's geopolitical culture. They reveal intriguing and complex plot lines and unexpected twists that prevailing nationalist-territorial-revanchist accounts of Putin's Russia have often obscured.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored how the current Russian leadership has synthesized various tropes and imaginaries on Russia's place in the world in order to arrive at the notion of a concession of territory that can help to realize higher national and geopolitical goals. It is indicative of a geopolitical culture that brings together a host of ideological power networks, which have been instrumental in generating cultural and civilizational discourses (see Toal 2017, 40). Such a process fuses together elements of the economic power networks that support modernization and accumulation-centric discourses, as well as incorporating security discourses that are structured around perceived threats to the state (40), in this case from both the West and China. In reformulating prevailing readings of Russia's geopolitical culture, this paper has highlighted the role of the Far East and recognized how the competing geopolitical visions that constitute this culture are informed by a mutual striving for great power status, which simultaneously works to continually reconfigure and negotiate the fraught relationship between territory, identity, and borders in contemporary Russia. Such a reconceptualization of geopolitical cultures, and its emphasis on the fluctuating and contested values placed on territory, also has relevance in other contexts and locales, perhaps most notably and recently when India and Bangladesh officially exchanged their border enclaves in the summer of 2015 (see Shewly 2017).

In the Russian case, the announcement on national television in November 2004 that the Russian Government may be prepared to give up a piece of sovereign territory, gained as result of the Second World War – the high-water mark of Russia and the Soviet Union's geopolitical status and spatial extent – was an extraordinary moment and the apogee of a sea change in Russian politics and presidential power. It placed an instrumental value on the nature of territory, and the Southern Kurils' transfer to Japan was represented as a chance to enhance Russia's security and unlock the economic development of the Far East and Siberia. Seen through the geopolitical visions of Trenin and Dugin, the exchange of these islands would permit Russia to increase its presence and potential in the region. Although the architects of these proposals were from polar opposites of the ideological spectrum, neither framed it as a concession to overcome the Soviet past, but rather as an evocative and bold appeal for reinstating Russia as a Great Power in Europe and Asia.

Putin's consolidation of power and apparent ideological flexibility have brought with it opportunities for fusing together competing geopolitical visions and their spatial imaginaries into a form of pragmatic patriotism. It is a dialectic appeal towards co-opting various constellations of the elite, and one which has not been restricted to the Southern Kurils. Putin has also countenanced territorial compromises with China in the Amur River (2004), a border demarcation with Kazakhstan (2005), and the agreement of a fifty-fifty split to resolve a disputed maritime zone in the Barents Sea with Norway (2010). Yet, this is the same leader who denounced

U.S. foreign policy at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, led Russia into conflict with Georgia over the breakaway territory of South Ossetia in summer 2008, and annexed Crimea in March 2014. These were moments of patriotic and nationalist fervor, but they were also a reaction to where Putin's security, economic, and geopolitical objectives had failed.

The ink on the caricatures of Putin's obsession with national territory becomes somewhat blurred on closer examination. Such caricatures obscure the ways in which the Russian leadership has at times proved to be adept at co-opting and synthesizing competing and contradictory understandings of territory and identity through geopolitical storylines. There is a certain duality and dialectic quality to this ability to pick up or discard whichever version best suits the prevailing economic and geopolitical circumstances. Although the discursive distinction between patriot and pragmatist has at times been difficult to discern, fractures emerge in Putin's revanchist tendencies when he proposes a concession of territory in exchange for enhanced prestige, power, and status. Whether Putin can continue to negotiate and mediate this duality in his pragmatic patriotism will determine not only the future of the Southern Kurils, but also his own future and with it the destiny of Russia.

## Note

1. The "Southern Kurils" correspond with Japan's claim on the "Northern Territories," which represent the islands of Kunashir, Shikotan, Iturup, and the Habomai Islands. As the sources of this research are primarily in Russian, the Russian terms for these islands are used throughout, though this is not intended to privilege the Russian claim.

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